

Break

“I'm here waiting for you

Even if the future is very different.”

Tui

From behind the glass partition, I watched Est exist like a ghost.

Not the romantic kind—no tragic elegance or haunted beauty. Just washed out. Like someone had taken the saturation slider on his life and dragged it all the way to the left.

He was at the front desk, half-perched on the reception chair, a can of cold coffee sweating in his hand. He wasn't really drinking it, just taking tiny sips every once in a while like he needed something to do with his mouth so he wouldn't sigh. He used to chatter when he came in. Complain about clients, rant about bad lighting, tell me three stories at once until I had to shoo him away to actually get work done. Now he moved in silence, straight lines, efficient and empty. He was tidying again.

Est never tidies.

He'd pulled everything off the reception shelves—the portfolio books, the aftercare cards, the zines we sold from local artists, my stupid little bowl of free candies. He rearranged them with the focus of someone defusing a bomb. Straightening stacks, wiping dust from corners that didn't have any, rotating a small potted cactus exactly three degrees.

Cleaning is what I do when I don't want to think.

Seeing him do it made something cold settle under my ribs.

I wiped down my station for the third time and tried to pretend I was busy. Tried to pretend I wasn't watching his reflection in the glass, the way his shoulders hunched just a little more each day. He'd stopped taking the couch in the back to nap between shoots. He used to sleep here like it was his second home—camera bag as a pillow, mouth slightly open, looking younger than he ever did awake. He'd wake up, eat whatever street food I shoved at him, then launch into a detailed breakdown of his latest gig. Now he barely stayed long enough to finish a coffee.

When he did talk, the words were functional.

No jokes. No commentary. No, “You will not BELIEVE what this influencer said to me today.”

I hated it. I hated that it had only taken three weeks to pull him this far under.

Lego had let me see the wound first.

Now I was watching it infect Est too.

He'd been avoiding me. Or trying to. Using work as an excuse. "They're having me shoot like twelve cafés in one week. It's... good. Busy. You know?"

I did know. Busy is a drug. It numbs.

He wasn't coming as often. And when he did, he stayed at the threshold of the room where I worked, like he'd drawn a line he wouldn't cross.

I wanted to drag him to the back, sit him down on the couch, and say, "Okay. Tell me where it hurts." But I could see it in his eyes: if I pushed, he'd bolt.

So I watched.

And cleaned my station again.

And tried not to take it personally that the boy whose life I'd watched crumble in my spare bedroom now thought he had to hide the pieces from me. Through the glass, I saw him pause in his manic organizing and check his phone. The way his face changed every time he looked at that screen—it was subtle, but if you knew him, you saw it. A quick flare of hope. A flicker of hurt. A slow resignation, heavier each time.

Whatever message he was waiting for still wasn't there.

William still wasn't answering.

He put the phone face-down on the desk and went back to aligning the business cards until they were perfectly parallel.

Hong stuck his head out from the back room, silver hair clipped up haphazardly, fingers streaked with red ink from his latest design.

"He's doing it again." Hong said quietly from my doorway, following my gaze.

"I can see that." I murmured.

"Should I stop him?" Hong asked. "Or is this... therapy?"

I watched Est stack and restack the small photo books again. He didn't need that many sample books on the front counter. No one ever actually opened them. But he handled them like relics from a vanished church.

"He's not ready to talk." I said. "If you go out there, he'll smile and say he's fine and you'll feel worse."

Hong sighed, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe. "He looks like a ghost someone forgot to finish drawing."

“Yeah.” I said softly. “My ghost.”

We stood there, watching our friend fold himself into angles that didn’t fit.

The studio felt empty, even when it was full.

Hong was humming softly at his station, sketching designs for a new client—a watercolor dragonfly for a girl who’d never been tattooed before. The buzzing of his machine was a familiar, comforting sound, but today it grated on my nerves.

Est hadn’t come in for three days.

He wasn’t officially avoiding the studio. He had excuses—legitimate, professional excuses. A new assignment for the magazine’s online edition, shooting upscale bistros and hole-in-the-wall noodle shops. He’d sent me a blurry photo of a plate of pad thai yesterday with the caption: Work is suffering. Send help (or a stomach pump). But I knew him. I knew the way he retreated when things got heavy.

When he was here, he moved like a ghost. Shoulders hunched, camera bag always on his shoulder like he was ready to bolt at any second. He avoided eye contact, deflecting my questions about William with jokes that didn’t quite land.

“William? Oh, you mean the recluse who owns half the city? Yeah, we’re great. Texting constantly. Definitely not being ignored.”

The sarcasm was sharp enough to cut, but underneath it, I saw the bruise.

I walked over to the reception desk, needing to do something with my hands. The counter was cluttered with appointment cards, consent forms, and a box my mother had mailed from the village. I hadn’t even opened it properly.

I pulled out the contents now: dried mango, a jar of chili paste that smelled like home, and a small, hand-carved wooden elephant.

“For luck.” her note said in shaky handwriting. “And because you work too hard. Are you eating? Is the studio safe? Don’t stay up too late.”

She worried. She always worried. Even now, with the studio successful, with clients booking months in advance, she still saw me as the boy who’d left the village with nothing but a lot of anger. I arranged the elephant next to the register, turning it so it faced the door. For luck. We could use some.

I snapped a photo of it and texted her: Thank you, Mae. The elephant is guarding the door. I’m eating. Promise.

Three weeks. That's all it had been since Est walked into William's apartment for the first time. Since Lego's heart broke in my studio. Since everything shifted on its axis.

Three weeks, and we were all spinning.

Est was spiraling into self-doubt, convinced he'd ruined everything by... existing. By being happy for a moment. By letting himself want something.

Lego was... Lego. Bright and resilient on the surface, but I saw the cracks. I saw the way they hesitated before talking about William now, the way they leaned into me a little more, seeking a different kind of anchor.

And William? William was a black hole. Silent. Absent.

I started organizing the consent forms into neat piles, alphabetical by last name. It was mindless work, the kind my therapist said was "grounding."

"Try to reframe the narrative," she'd told me last session. "Instead of seeing chaos, look for the patterns of growth."

I snorted softly. Growth. Sure. If growth looked like everyone I cared about falling apart in different corners of the city.

I looked at the wooden elephant. At the dried mango. At the studio around me—the art on the walls, Hong humming in the corner, the life I'd built from scratch. Change was terrifying. It was messy. It hurt.

I picked up the jar of chili paste and walked to the back. "Hong." I called out. "Break time. My mom sent snacks."

Hong looked up, eyes bright. "Does this mean we get to eat the spicy stuff?"

"It means we eat the spicy stuff and wait for Est to come have a mental breakdown over a package."

Hong grinned. "My favorite kind of afternoon."

I smiled back, feeling a little less like a ghost myself. We were a mess. But we were a mess together.

I looked at the empty doorway where Est had walked out.

He used to leave and I wouldn't worry until the next day.

Now I worried every time the door closed.

Hong nudged my arm. "Hey."

“Yeah?”

“You know how you always tell your clients healing looks ugly before it looks good?”

“Yeah.”

“Same thing.” he said simply. “With him. With you. With Lego. With William.” He paused. “You don’t get to see the finished tattoo right away.”

“Yeah.” I said quietly. “Same thing.”

Because if I hovered by the door waiting for ghosts, I’d never be there when the real people walked back in.

The studio clock ticks with a pettiness that feels personal. I’m sprawled in the tattoo chair, feet up, flipping through a dog-eared copy of Bangkok Ink from three years ago. The music playing low in the speakers—some indie Thai band with lyrics I don’t understand but a beat that keeps the silence from being unbearable—doesn’t even register anymore. Just white noise. The reception is too clean. I’ve already wiped the counter twice. Est hasn’t shown up again. Third day in a row.

Since he came in looking like a ghost, since the spiral started, since he started using every possible excuse to avoid the studio.

Product shoots. Magazine gigs. Late nights editing.

He’s not lying. He’s busy. I know he’s busy.

But the studio feels empty without him.

The chair in the corner where he used to crash between shoots sits unoccupied. No camera bag spilling lenses onto the desk. No half-empty coffee cans. No rants about impossible clients. Just me and the clock and the knowledge that he’s pulling away because something went sideways with William, and I’m too chickenshit to ask.

The door chimes.

I look up, expecting another walk-in looking for “tribal” or a name in cursive.

Instead, Hong walks in.

Hong stands in the doorway, and for a second, my brain shorts out.

He’s wearing university clothes—flashy, expensive-looking, nothing like the paint-splattered rags he usually wears here. Not his usual ink-stained tees and paint-

splattered jeans. Actual clothes—Silver rings glinting on his fingers, his hair styled instead of artfully messy. He looks like he stepped out of one of his own clothing line photoshoots. His silver hair is pulled back, showing off the sharp angles of his face. He's carrying a large canvas, wrapped in brown paper, tucked under one arm like it weighs nothing.

Behind him, peeking around his shoulder like a shy animal, is Lego.

Bright as a sunflower in a storm.

And my heart does something complicated.

Lego is wearing shiny black clothes—frills at the cuffs, a high collar, the kind of outfit that looks like it belongs in a gothic fairy tale. Their hair is in two perfect pigtails, tied with ribbons that match the frills. They look like a doll, like something you'd want to protect from the world.

Too cute.

Too cute for my heart, which decides, unhelpfully, to slam against my ribs like it's trying to escape.

They also look like something you'd want to touch very, very badly.

A crossbody bag dangles from one shoulder, stuffed to bursting with keychains that jingle as they move. The other bag is Hong's—his backpack, battered and covered in pins. Lego's carrying it with exaggerated care.

I can't stop looking at Lego.

He look ridiculous and perfect and so heartbreakingly beautiful it hurts.

I couldn't breathe. It was too much. The frills. The pigtails. The sheer, unadulterated cuteness.

"Close your mouth." Hong said, walking past me like he owned the place. "You'll catch flies."

I've forgotten how to speak.

Hong catches me staring and smirks. "What, never seen pigtails before?"

I blink, heat creeping up my neck.

Hong smirks, that infuriating, knowing smirk that makes me want to thank him or throw him out. Possibly both. "We only had classes in the morning. Thought we'd drop by."

He leans the painting against the wall and moves into the studio like he owns it—

flicking on the accent lights, adjusting the chair by the window, touching things with the casual familiarity of someone who's spent a thousand hours in this space.

Lego follows, clutching a bag that clinks with what sounds like a hundred plush keychains.

Something in my chest tightens at the sight. I'm on my feet before I even know I've moved, the magazine sliding off my lap to the floor with a soft thud.

"You shouldn't be carrying that," I blurt, already stepping forward. "Give it to me."

Hong raises an eyebrow. "It's not that heavy, P'Tui."

"I said give it." I insist, reaching for the backpack.

Hong mouth curls into a sharp, smug smile. "Oh? Now you want to help? Where was this energy when I carried your new light box up three flights of stairs last week?"

I flush. "That was different."

"How?" he says sweetly. "This is lighter."

Lego laughs—soft and delighted—and the sound makes my ears go hot. I look over at them, and immediately regret it.

They're staring at me. Not just staring. Stuck.

Their eyes are wide, golden in the light, and for a second, they look lost—like they walked into the wrong shop, like they forgot what they were going to say. Their lips part just a little, and they clutch the straps of Hong's backpack tighter.

Oh.

Hong's gaze flicks from Lego's face to mine and back again, and his smirk sharpens into something downright predatory.

"Well, this is cute." he says under his breath. "Should we give you two a moment, or...?"

Lego's cheeks go scarlet. I can feel my own doing the same.

Lego laughs again, a nervous little puff of sound. "We came from class. Hong had a critique this morning. I... didn't have time to change." They tug at the frilled sleeve self-consciously. The little flowers painted on their nails catch the light, white petals and yellow centers like tiny daisies.

Lego edges closer to the counter, eyes still finding their way back to my face and then darting away whenever I catch them. Their usual effortless chatter is gone, replaced with shy smiles and fidgeting fingers. They set their jangling bag of plush

keychains on a chair and gently slide Hong's backpack off their shoulder, placing it next to it like it's something fragile.

"Busy day?"

"Dead." I admit. "Just waiting for walk-ins who want their boyfriend's name in Old English."

Hong snorts. "Classic."

For a moment, everything feels right.

Lego's laughter rings bright. Hong's quiet smiles. My studio, full of people who matter.

But underneath it all, I'm aware of the absences.

Est hasn't been here today.

William's shadow looms over Lego.

The circle's incomplete. But it feels possible to fix, One conversation at a time. One apology at a time. One honest moment at a time.

"If the day is so quiet." Hong announces, leaning against my station and picking at a loose thread on my sleeve. "Why aren't you feeding us?"

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Food, P'Tui." Hong stands, already moving toward the door like it's decided. "You have two starving college students in your studio and an empty afternoon. Do the math."

"I'm not your mother, Hong."

"Thank god." Before I could argue, he'd walked to the door, Hong flips the sign on the door from OPEN to CLOSED with zero hesitation. "Come on. Let's go."

"I know you have ingredients upstairs. I've seen your fridge."

"When have you seen my—"

"Last week. When you weren't looking." He grabs his keys. "Lego, we're going to the market first. Tui's going to cook for us."

Lego, who has been quietly admiring sitting, looks up with wide eyes. "We are?"

"We are." Hong says decisively.

And just like that, I'm being herded out of my own studio.

The market is chaos—Hong moves through it like a general commanding troops, pointing at vegetables and fish, haggling in a way that makes the aunties laugh and give him extra cilantro.

Lego walks beside me, their pigtails bouncing with every step, eyes bright as they take in the colors. They pause at a fruit stall, reaching out to touch a dragon fruit like it's something magical.

"You like those?" I ask.

He nod. "My sister used to cut them into stars. Before..." He trail off, then recover with a soft smile. "I haven't had one in a while."

I buy two without asking. The vendor wraps them in newspaper, and Lego clutches the package like I've handed them treasure.

Hong reappears with a bag of prawns, grinning. "Got them down to half price. The auntie said I have 'honest eyes.'"
He winks. "I lied through my teeth."

"You're terrible." I mutter.

"You love it."

I don't argue.

My apartment sits above the studio—a small, warm space with brown leather furniture, cream-colored walls, and wooden shelves lined with books and half-melted candles. It smells like sandalwood and coffee, the scent clinging to the throw blankets draped over the couch.

Lego steps inside carefully, like they're entering a gallery.

"It's so... cozy." they breathe, turning in a slow circle. "It feels like you."

Hong, predictably, makes himself at home immediately. He kicks off his shoes, drops onto the leather armchair, and starts rifling through my record collection without permission.

"You still have this?" He holds up a Miles Davis album. "I thought you sold it."

"I thought about it." I say, setting the grocery bags on the counter. "Then I didn't."

"Good." He slides it onto the turntable. The crackling warmth of trumpet and piano fills the room.

Lego lingers by the bookshelf, fingers tracing the spines. "You have The Little Prince." they say, surprised. "In Thai and French."

"My mom sent the Thai one." I explain, pulling out a cutting board. "I bought the French one in college. Thought it would make me seem cultured."

"Did it?" Hong calls from the couch.

"No. Just pretentious."

Lego giggles—soft, musical. They pull the book down, flipping through it like greeting an old friend.

Cooking becomes a kind of dance.

It was domestic. It was chaotic. It was perfect.

Hong, despite his earlier bravado, is actually helpful. He minces garlic without being asked, rinses vegetables, tastes the broth and tells me it needs more fish sauce (he's right). He moves around my kitchen like he's been doing it for years.

Lego sits at the counter, legs swinging, watching us with quiet fascination. When I hand them a bowl of cherry tomatoes to halve, they do it carefully, precisely, arranging the pieces in a perfect circle.

"You don't have to make it pretty," I say, amused.

"I like things pretty." he reply simply.

Hong snorts. "That explains the outfit."

Lego blushes.

"And you wear it better than any model could." Hong says without looking up from the cutting board. It's matter-of-fact. Honest. Lego's blush deepens.

I plate the food: stir-fried prawns with garlic and pepper, jasmine rice, a clear soup with winter melon and pork ribs. Simple. The kind of meal my mother used to make when money was tight but love wasn't.

We eat on the low coffee table, sitting on floor cushions because my apartment doesn't have a proper dining table. Hong sprawls like a lazy cat. Lego sits with their legs tucked under them, polite and careful until Hong nudges them with his foot.

"Relax." Hong says. "You look like you're at a job interview."

Lego laughs and finally loosens, reaching for more rice.

The conversation flows easy, punctuated by laughter and the clink of chopsticks.

Hong complains about a professor who "wouldn't know good design if it bit him." Lego talks about their dance class, about bruised feet and a teacher who makes them hold impossible positions. I talk about a client who wanted their ex's name tattooed, then changed their mind mid-session.

"What did you do?" Lego asks, eyes wide.

"Turned it into a flower." I say. "A very angry-looking flower."

Lego dissolves into giggles, shoulders shaking. Hong grins, snapping a photo on his phone without asking.

"For evidence." he says. "So I can prove Tui has a sense of humor."

I throw a napkin at him.

"Okay." Hong said, mouth full. "This is why we keep you around."

"I'm right here." Lego said, pouring water into everyone's glasses.

"You're the mascot. Tui's the chef."

I kicked Hong under the table. He kicked me back.

I watched them.

Hong, leaning so close to Lego their shoulders touched, pointing at something on the phone. Lego, leaning into the touch without even realizing it, his face lit up by the screen glow.

They fit. They just... fit.

And then my eyes landed on Lego. Really landed on him.

The way he tucked his hair behind his ear. The way his eyelashes caught the light. The easy, open way he loved people—how he loved William, how he was learning to love Hong, how he looked at me like I was a hero just because I made soup. It was easy to love him back.

Dangerously easy.

My brain whispered. He's nineteen. You're twenty-six. You're the responsible one.

But my chest ached. A physical, hollow hurt. I missed him. Even though he was sitting right there, stealing my crab, I missed him. I missed the version of him that wasn't hurt. I wanted to be the one to fix it. I wanted to be the reason he smiled that

big.

I was in trouble. I was so, so in trouble. And as Lego laughed, head thrown back, pigtails swinging, I knew I'd cook for them every day for the rest of my life if it meant I could just keep looking at him. Even if it was wrong. Even if it hurt.

Later, when the food is gone and the dishes are stacked in the sink, we collapse on the couch. Hong stretches out like he owns it, feet in my lap. Lego sits between us, knees drawn up, the dragon fruit I bought earlier peeled and sliced into careful stars on a plate.

Miles Davis has given way to something softer—Slow and hypnotic.

"This is nice." Lego says quietly, biting into a piece of fruit. Juice drips onto their fingers, and they lick it away absently.

I can't stop watching him.

The way their pigtails are slightly lopsided now, ribbons loosened. The way they hum along to the music without realizing it. The way their eyes crinkle when they smile, small flowers painted on their nails catching the lamplight.

This is dangerous, I think. This feeling.

Because it's not just attraction. It's not just wanting to touch them, though I do. It's the deeper pull—the desire to know them in every small, specific way. To memorize the songs they hum, the books they love, the way they arrange tomatoes in circles.

Hong nudges my ribs with his foot. When I glance over, he's watching me with that knowing look.

"What?" I say defensively.

"Nothing." His mouth twitches. "Just... you should see your face right now."

"Shut up."

"Make me."

Lego looks between us, confused, and Hong just laughs—low and satisfied, like he's won something.

"You two are weird." Lego says, but he is smiling.

"We're perfect." Hong corrects, stealing a piece of dragon fruit from the plate. "Tui's brooding, I'm charming, and you're the only one keeping us from descending into chaos."

"That doesn't sound like a balanced dynamic." Lego points out.

"Who wants balance?" Hong says. "Balance is boring."

I don't argue. Because in this moment—cramped in my small, warm apartment, full of simple food and soft music, with Hong's feet in my lap and Lego's laughter lingering in the air—I don't want balance.

I want this.

Even if my mind keeps whispering warnings: They're too young. You're his friend. Don't ruin this.

But Lego leans their head on my shoulder, just for a second, the weight of them warm and trusting, and my mind goes quiet.

Hong catches my eye again. This time, he doesn't tease. He just nods, a small, almost imperceptible gesture.

I know, it says. I see you.

And somehow, that's enough.

For now, it's enough to sit here, surrounded by people who make the world feel less heavy.

Even if it's dangerous. Even if it's wrong. Even if I'm already too far gone to turn back.